Current Copula and Negative Questions: When We Use Them···Ways to Teach Them···

CLANCY, Thomas M.

Introduction

Upon first settling down into a foreign culture one begins to notice certain aspects of the native language. For instance, the way in which the native inhabitants respond to certain stimuli often gives the non-native speaker clues as to what is being said. On a hot summer day a middle aged Japanese man may take his first gulp of ice-cold beer and utter the word "umai" with a look of satisfaction on his face. At this time one may conclude that the man is expressing pleasure, and that the word umai must mean something like "*that's good*" or "*that's refreshing*" or perhaps umai is a way of offering thanks to the local Beer God.

From my point of view, that of a language teacher and an aspiring linguist, the above situation offers up two interesting points. The first point of interest is the activity that preceded the man's utterance, while the second is the explanation or the motive for the utterance. That is to say, I am interested in the activities that lead up to the stimulation of one's senses and the spontaneous language that is a direct result of this stimulation. For example, when one tastes something good, they are receiving input via their mouths, and a common result of this sensory input may be a spontaneous utterance such as: "*Oh man, that tastes good.*"

1.1. Current Copula

Input is received through one of five senses that, baring any imperfections, all humans possess. Throughout the day humans are bombarded with input that causes them or motivates them to communicate. Often this communication is of a spontaneous nature, impulsive in character, and given without a thought. You wake up early Monday morning, look in the mirror, and grumble: "*God, I look terrible.*" Your grandmother, while rubbing her legs, comments that: "*It feels like rain.*" While hugging your spouse you whisper: "*Oh honey, you smell good.*" These are but a few of the ways in which we communicatively produce output as a direct result of sensory input. In fact, a person's waking moments are filled with such instances because we have no control over the flood of input that our bodies receive.

So how can English language teachers capture the essence of the above scenarios and use them in the language classroom? Well, for starters just explaining the concept of communication as a result of sensory input makes for an interesting listening activity, but beyond that there are many more exciting lessons to be developed. And because of the fluency and automaticity required to produce language spontaneously, there is real value in practicing such utterances. As we shall see, teachers, with the use of a little imagination, can easily come up with some very authentic communicative activities.

1.2. Current Copula: Objectives

The purpose of the first half of this paper is to suggest ways to teach current copula as they are used by native speakers of English. Of the various grammatical structures used in stimulus/response utterances, current copula responses are perhaps the most common. When native speakers of English receive stimulus through one of their five senses, chances are pretty good that if an utterance is forthcoming, an utterance in the form of a current copula will be used.

Current copulas (see Quirk, R. & Greenbaum, S. 1973 for a more detailed

explanation) are used to express subject complements in the here and now, thus the word "current". For the purposes of this paper I will use only the current copulas that represent the five senses and conform to the following sentence structures:

1. Subject → look(s) / feel(s) / sound(s) / taste(s) / smell(s) → adjective.

2. Subject → look(s) / feel(s) / sound(s) / taste(s) / smell(s) → adjective → noun.

Sentence structure number one is often used to draw attention to the stimuli (in this case the subject) that is causing the utterance. Hence, "*She looks beautiful.*". "*I feel terrible.*". or "*You smell good.*" are all attempts to draw attention to the subject of the sentence as a direct result of the subject causing the stimuli.

Sentence structure number two functions much like number one, but it takes on a comparative characteristic. Thus, (e.g., "*He smells like a smokestack.*") is an attempt to draw attention to the subject of the sentence that is causing the stimuli, as well as to compare the subject that is causing the stimuli to a smokestack. In this way, emphasis can be placed on the descriptive characteristics of the subject (e.g., how he smells).

1.3. Current Copula: Level

The following are examples of communicative activities that are authentic in nature. That is, given the fact that classroom activities are never truly authentic, I have highlighted activities that are as close as possible to what one may experience in the real world. Also, as the chosen activities are relatively difficult, I recommend

these activities for intermediate to advanced level second language learners of English. On the other hand, they could also be used as "focus on function" noticing activities for high-level beginner classes. In this way, when the students reach the intermediate level they will already have had some exposure to the function (how to use), and practice in the use of these structures.

1.4. Current Copula: Organization

Many of the following activities can be presented with the teacher standing in front of the class, in small groups, or in pairs. It is up to the individual teacher to decide how much authority they want to hold over their students. I have found that starting the class with examples of how the activity should be done, and then breaking the class down into smaller groups or pairs works well with university students. However, the activities presented in this paper are an attempt to show teachers the possibilities of teaching current copula, rather than a step-by-step teaching plan. Furthermore, it is my hope that teachers learn to question when, where, why, and how native speakers of English use certain grammatical structures and then duplicating the situation in the classroom instead of simply teaching the structures as if they have no function in the real world. Finally, no one knows the level, organizational constraints, and general atmosphere of their classrooms better than the teacher who teaches it; and therefore, use the following activities as you will and disregard the rest.

1.5. Current Copula: Procedure

The current copula activities I have in mind require the gathering of real materials (chocolate, soap, recorded tapes, etc.). By the words "real materials". I mean authentic things that look, taste, smell, sound, and feel genuine. This will require some effort and perhaps some revenue on the teachers' part, but a lot of the materials can be reused in future classes.

Materials can be found in your home, some will have to be purchased, and still

others will need to be created. These materials, props if you will, will be given or shown to the students to look at, taste, smell, listen to, or touch. In this way, the objective is to elicit a genuine response in the form of a current copula. For example, prior to the class the teacher puts a frozen bottle of water into a bag. During the activity the teacher asks one of the students to reach into the bag and touch the object. The student does so, and because of the cool stimulus, responds with the words: "*It feels cold*".

Of course this may seem like a lot of effort just to evoke a three-word response, but other activities can be introduced in a more conversational manner. For example, the teacher can bring several bottles of perfume or cologne to class and ask the students for their honest opinion concerning the smell of each sample. This could prove to bring about a bonanza of responses such as: "*This one smells good.*". "*Oh, it smells sweet.*". or "*It smells like medicine to me.*" Authenticity is at its best in such activities; and indeed, it is possible to get so wrapped up in the conversation that the classroom setting is all but forgotten.

Other ideas and examples include the following:

1.5.1. *Activity 1: The Stimulus of Sight*

Depending on how much energy you want to put into this activity, there are elaborate props such as live videos that can be taken in the real world. Places like Tokyo's Harajaku Park on a Sunday afternoon provide a wealth of unusual looking individuals. Any person, place, or thing that has a curious appearance will work fine, especially if it resembles something or someone else, or if its appearance is in contrast to what it should look like.

People or parts of their bodies often resemble something other than what they are. Some people are bald, and their heads resemble an egg. Others have unusual hairstyles that take on the appearance of a poodle or a porcupine. Buildings are sometimes in the shape of pyramids or domes, while food from one country has a similar appearance to that of another. If all else fails, or perhaps you simply do not have time to gather a lot of materials, ask your students to bring one item each

from their homes. In this way, the students are forced to think about the function of current copula.

In the classroom and with visual materials at hand, simply show the objects or videos to the students and have them respond to the stimuli using current copula structure: "*That man looks like a bear.*". "*That child looks happy.*". etc. Encourage the students to use their imaginations—pushing them to identify all of the visual stimuli.

1.5.2. *Activity 2: The Stimulus of Sound*

Again, and for the sake of authenticity, live sounds can be recorded and brought into the classroom. Sounds of dogs barking, car horns beeping, and babies crying make for excellent props. The teacher can even have a contest for the students. Play a sound and award points to the individual or group that can identify the sound first. Of course, the students should voice their answers in the structure being studied (e.g.. "*It sounds like a _____.*").

As usual, if you do not have time to actually go out and record sounds, create the sounds in the classroom. This not only provides the opportunity for practice but also brings up some interesting cross-cultural discussions about the differences in the way different countries replicate certain sounds (e.g., a dog's bark is "bow wow" in English but "*won won*" in Japanese). Other cross-cultural discussions may include an explanation of the native English speaker's use of, "*That sounds good.*" when hearing a particularly good idea or plan.

1.5.3. *Activity 3: The Stimulus of Smell*

Have you ever tried a "scratch and sniff" sample from a magazine? Remember your curiosity and the feeling of anticipation as you put your nose by the freshly scratched sample and took a whiff? It is not overly difficult to duplicate these emotions, not to mention the authentic utterances that follow the stimulation. Simply take various objects from your household (perfume, detergent, peanut butter, etc.), put them in individual bags, and pass them around your class. This can be done as a contest as well. For this activity (a) number the samples, (b) have

the student write their answers, and (c) after everyone is finished, the students produce past tense sentences (e.g.. "*Number one smelled like* _____."). Total the points, and the student or group with the most points is the winner.

One, perhaps controversial, issue that arises when teaching current copula, is the native speaker use of the structure "*It looks, sounds, smells, feels, or tastes like shit.*" Male native speakers of English (in most situations) have no inhibitions about using this structure, but females may do so under their breath or in a lowered voice. This function can be diplomatically explained to most students over the age of 18, and students should at least be aware of its existence for listening purposes. Having said that, it remains up to the individual teacher to follow their own beliefs concerning such matters.

1.5.4. *Activity 4: The Stimulus of Touch*

As with the stimulus of smell suggestions listed above, touch can be replicated by having students reach into a bag, touch an object, and respond. The objects can range from the unusual (children's green slime), to the common (a stapler or calculator). Furry animals, pudding, something wet, something rough—teachers should always be on the lookout for new props and collect them as time goes by.

1.5.5. *Activity 5: The Stimulus of Taste*

The stimulus of taste is perhaps the most problematic activity to carry out in the classroom. There are two reasons for this. The first is the sheer hassle of bringing food and drink into the classroom, especially a large classroom of say 35 students. The second is the institution's liability to the students. In fact, there may be rules concerning the consumption of food and beverages in the classroom. Consequently, it behooves the teacher to ask for permission before trying this activity.

However, assuming that permission is given, the teacher must then decide on the scale of this activity. On a large scale, a potluck party may be organized. This in effect takes much of the burden off the teacher and distributes the responsibility for bringing food and drinks equally among the participants. In order to elicit responses such as "*This tastes like pineapple.*" or "*It tastes sweet.*" the teacher should

emphasize the fact that this activity is meant to produce spontaneous responses that draw attention to the subject of the sentence (in this case the food that is being tasted). Therefore, the food should have a flavor that is either identifiable (e.g., sour, salty, spicy, etc.) or resembles another type of food (e.g., curry, bananas, chocolate, etc.).

On a much smaller scale the teacher may simply bring a few samples of food from home or buy an assortment of candy at a local convenience store. Variety-packs or bags of assorted candy that one sees before Halloween are perfect for a small-scale activity that also draws the students' attention to the function of current copula use.

2. Negative Questions

Having lived in Japan for numerous years, I sometimes find myself avoiding the use of negative questions when addressing a Japanese person. And, as I am an English teacher, I always feel torn between the choices of letting the conversation continue or giving negative feedback when receiving an incorrect response to a negative question. I now believe that the reason Japanese students of English find it difficult to understand negative questions is that they do not understand the function of such questions.

2.1. Negative Questions: Objectives

When I first started teaching English, I would tell my students that negative questions are answered in the same way as positive questions. Thus, if they become confused when hearing a negative question (e.g., *"Didn't you study?"*), all they have to do is change it to a positive question (e.g., *"Did you study?"*) and answer honestly (e.g., *"Yes, I did."* or *"No, I didn't."*). However, in real conversation people do not have time to monitor. That is, they do not have time to consciously pay attention to certain elements of their speech before speaking (Ellis, R. 1997). Especially if it is in response to a question that is, under normal circumstances, given spontaneously.

Negative questions, like current copula, are often delivered in stimulus/response situations. As mentioned in the current copula section of this paper, humans receive stimuli via their eyes, nose, ears, mouth, and nerve endings, and we transmit messages as a direct result of stimulation to any one of these receptors. Because of this, the function of negative questions is often a means of transmitting messages of surprise or disbelief when one's senses receive stimulation (see Celce-Murcia, M. & Larsen-Freeman, D. 1983 for a more detailed explanation). For example, a colleague, who appears to be soaking wet, walks into an office and because of the visual input, she is greeted with the question: "*Didn't you bring an umbrella?*" You take a sip of coffee that your husband has just handed you and ask: "*Isn't this coffee too strong.*" Or perhaps you smell smoke and ask your wife: "*Didn't you turn off the oven?*" All of these examples seem common and easy to understand to native speakers of English, but this is only because they exist in and have a function in the English language; however, this may not be the case in other languages.

Negative questions may be explained to one's students in much the same way as the following examples are explained:

1. "Didn't you eat breakfast?"
2. "Doesn't your mother have a driver's license?"
3. "Can't you speak Japanese?"

Question number one may be triggered by a visual image of someone eating a large lunch in a ravenous manner, where as question number two may be the direct result of a comment such as: "*I had to drive my mother all over town this morning.*" Again, such questions often come about as a result of sensory input. Consequently, in the above examples sight and sound triggered the resulting utterances.

Pedagogically, negative questions are rather difficult to practice in an authentic manner. Whereas one may comment to a stranger, "*It looks like rain.*". one rarely uses negative questions with someone they are unfamiliar with. Thus, a certain

degree of familiarity between teacher and student is best. Also, creating authentic situations for negative question practice is difficult. As a humorous example, one can imagine a teacher who douses him/herself with a pail of water in order to elicit the response: *"Didn't you bring an umbrella?"* Nevertheless, there are ways to get the students to respond with negative question use.

2.2. Negative Questions: Level

O'Grady and Dobrovolsky (1996) point out that negative questions (in fact all questions) are learned late in the first language acquisition of an English-speaking child. So, it should be of no surprise that second language learners have difficulties acquiring such grammatical structures. It is for this reason that I recommend teaching negative questions only as a "noticing" activity for false beginners and as a genuine lesson to high intermediate/advanced students.

2.3. Negative Questions: Organization

As for organization, and for reasons of production (negative questions require a lot of practice) pair and group work are best. Granted, the function of negative questions should be explained and demonstrating their use is also necessary, but after a sufficient amount of time has been devoted to function and demonstration, it is best to turn the class over to the students. As negative questions are delivered in a natural and spontaneous fashion, time spent on practice and repetition can help to smooth out the delays associated with monitoring.

2.4. Negative Questions: Procedure

As mentioned earlier, native speakers of English often use negative questions in response to sensory input. Also, there is an element of surprise or disbelief surrounding such utterances. Thus, in order to create situations in which students respond with negative questions, one must add an element of surprise or disbelief into the activity.

2.4.1. *Activity l: Surprising Responses*

Of the five senses, one's ability to hear is the easiest to stimulate in the classroom. This can be done simply by responding in a surprising manner to students' queries. Questions such as, *"Do you like _____?"* or *"What kind of _____ do you like?"* work best; however, any question will do, and if you can not think of a surprising response, simply have the student ask another question. The following highlight possible scenarios:

1. Student: Do you like Japanese food?
   Teacher: (Surprising response) Yes, but only Japanese seafood. I eat seafood three times a day.
   Student: *"Isn't that expensive?"*

2. Student: What are you going to do after school?
   Teacher: (Surprising response) I have a date with one of my girlfriends.
   Student: *"Aren't you married?"*

3. Student: What is your hobby?
   Teacher: (Surprising response) I don't have a hobby. I work 12 hours a day, seven days a week.
   Student: *Aren't you tired?*

Again, it should be noted that a certain amount of familiarity is required for these conversations to take on an air of authenticity. For example, in conversation number two a middle aged male teacher may receive the desired response due to his appearance, or because he had previously informed his students that he was married. It should also be noted that although I have used very simple examples, the teacher can expand on these conversations. In other words, the teacher can keep the conversation alive. For example using conversation number two again:

Student: What are you going to do after school?
Teacher: (Surprising response # 1) I have a date with one of my girlfriends.
Student: *"Aren't you married?"*

Teacher: (Surprising response # 2) Yes, but my wife and I have an arrangement about dating. I can date whomever I like.
Student: *"Isn't she jealous?"* (Conversation continues…)

After you have sufficiently demonstrated negative question use, turn the class over to the students and let them practice in pairs or small groups while you walk around and check on their progress. Again, as this is neither an easy lesson to teach, nor to understand, the more time devoted to practice the better.

Finally, if some of the students are still having trouble understanding, explain that negative questions often come into a conversation at the same time that Japanese people use the utterance *"heeee!"* or *"eeee!"* ([hE:::] or [E:::] written phonetically). For example, an English teacher may code-switch (*"Heeee, didn't you study."*) when responding to a Japanese student's comment such as, *"I failed the test."*

2.4.2. *Activity 2: Role-playing*

A second activity using negative questions involves role-playing. In role-playing activities the students should try to highlight all or combinations of the five senses receiving stimulation, and the negative questions that are produced as a result. In this activity the students themselves make a skit or short play in which negative questions are highlighted. The skits can be short or long depending on how much time you wish to devote to practice. An example of a short skit is as follows:

> One student (playing the part of a mother) tells her son (played by another student) to sit down at the dining room table because she has just prepared dinner for him. After a few bites and a moment of hesitation the son pushes the plate away with a sigh of resignation. The mother then responds: *"Aren't you hungry!"* To which the son replies: *"Oh sorry, I ate a couple of hamburgers at Burger King before I came home."* Mother: *"Didn't I tell you that I would make dinner for you?"* Son: *"Oh, sorry, I forgot."*

Such skits can be done in pairs or small groups and teachers can implement any of the following rules or create their own depending on your classroom situation:

1. Give the students plenty of examples, as they tend to repeat the utterance that causes the stimulation. For example, if the scenario is one in which two people have been together for the last eight hours and have not eaten, a comment such as "*I'm not hungry.*" often results in the student responding: "*Aren't you hungry?*"

2. Time spent on skit preparation should be kept to less than 15 minutes. The students are not expected to master or acquire these structures overnight; rather, these activities are intended to draw their attention to the stimulus/response function of negative questions. A skit like the example above can easily be completed in 10 minutes.

3. Encourage the students to incorporate as many negative questions as possible into their skits. Explain to them that although this is not natural, you want them to have many chances to practice. At the end of the skits, give special recognition to the group that used the most negative questions.

4. Wait until after a group's skit to offer comments. Ask if anyone noticed any mistakes. If there were mistakes that no one caught, point them out as a noticing activity. Then have the group repeat the skit in its corrected form.

5. Have the audience note each stimulus/response situation. Question them about it after the skits. For example, (in the above skit) why did the mother respond using the negative question, "*Aren't you hungry?*"

6. Finally, tell the students that from now on you will occasionally shock or surprise their senses, and that they should try to respond in an appropriate manner.

3. Conclusion

This paper is intended to highlight the function of current copula and negative questions, as well as to demonstrate activities that help supply the exposure that is needed to manage them spontaneously and naturally. In addition, as function is often neglected in textbooks that are currently offered on the market, perhaps it is

up to the individual teacher to develop their own materials and props that highlight when, where, why, and how native speakers of English use certain sentence structures.

Although current copula and negative questions are difficult to teach and learn, they are a necessary part of fluency in English. The more exposure students receive, the easier it is for them to speak and respond in an appropriate fashion.

In addition, I feel it is up to individual teacher to question the motives behind the second language that is being taught. That is to say, what causes native speakers of English to produce an utterance such as: "*Wow, it tastes like avocados.*" By questioning such utterances one can develop an awareness of the language (e.g., I said it taste like avocados because of the stimulus to my taste buds). From awareness, a hypothesis is born. For instance, the same type of utterance is used when I touch, smell, hear, or see something. Which leads to thoughts of applying this knowledge in the classroom and for students to use in the real world.

It seems that by following such an outline, one can truly emphasize an important but often ignored aspect of language teaching—that of function. And indeed, by questioning the everyday use of our native language we can enrich our classrooms in an area that is always in need of improvement—that of authentic communicative activities.

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